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ABSTRACT

New awareness of the need for foreign language proficiency and cultural understanding in international business means that closer links between language departments and business schools must be forged. The University of Wisconsin-Madison has established a foreign business internship program co-sponsored by the language department, business school, and a regional chamber of commerce in France. Its candidates are generally seniors who have spent a semester in France. Students are placed with small-to-medium-sized firms for five weeks, during which they conduct a research project on the host company. The program provides American students with experience in a French country, increased French proficiency, and an understanding of international business practices. It also opens the door for both awareness and cooperative projects on the part of French firms. Experience with the program to date has shown that the French companies have been extremely cooperative. They have also been unprepared to guide an American student, so a study guide was developed to direct interns' attention to certain aspects of the business. The internships have proven to be very valuable to students, and the research projects play a key role in the program's success. (MSE)

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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN INTERNSHIPS ABROAD, THE COMMERCIAL FRENCH CURRICULUM AND THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

by

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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN INTERNSHIPS ABROAD, THE COMMERCIAL FRENCH CURRICULUM AND THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY.

The teaching of foreign language for business is a relatively new field. As the pioneers could testify, the fight was intense when it came to establishing such courses in predominantly literature-oriented departments. Fortunately, it is now a recognized field, attracting a respectable number of students, Foreign language majors, but also -and that is so encouraging- students in Business and Economics who realize how a greater proficiency in a foreign language and a good socio-cultural knowledge of foreign countries may tie in with their business studies and influence their career plans.

Our situation has changed further as America suddenly woke up to the competitiveness tune; Overnight, the necessity to perform well abroad became the leitmotif of many speeches. This latest move may constitute a turning point for our programs, if the linguistic and socio-cultural requirements are given the place they deserve in the acquisition of international expertise.

This new situation, however, means that some adjustment will have to be made as more bridges are created between language departments and Business schools. as the linguistic and socio-

cultural proficiency needed for international business will be left to us to explore, define and pass on to students. This goes much further than what many of us had anticipated when we started or took over, let's say business French, German or Spanish, simply because it was popular among the students who could read Proust but not translate "checking account". To take on the responsibilities of implementing that language and culture component of internationally-oriented business curricula is a difficult task that will require a lot of thinking, cooperation, and imagination. This task, however, is a great asset for the future. Our programs will firmly establish themselves, not merely as an appendix of foreign language curricula, but rather as indispensable component of international studies and provide a decisive contribution to a better knowledge of foreign countries, an increased ability to communicate in foreign languages, thus paving the way for a true economic competitiveness.

I see the development of our field along two major lines: one is to make an inventory of the numerous course components (topics, activities, assignments, methods) of all the business language programs in US colleges and Universities. This work has already started either through clearinghouses at professional meetings or through surveys created and conducted by devoted colleagues; the other line is that of exploration and

experimentation of new courses and activities as a way to strengthen existing syllabi.

Today, I would like to contribute to the latter aspect by presenting an already established internship program in French companies in its relationship to a specific business French program, as well as in relation to its impact on business communities, in France and in the US.

Allow me to briefly introduce the University of Wisconsin-Madison business internship program. The program is co-sponsored and co-organized by the French Department, the Business School and the Regional Chamber of Commerce of Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur, based in Marseille. It is aimed at students in French and Business, mostly seniors who have already spent at least a semester in France. They are placed with small or medium-sized firms, for a period of five weeks during which time they carry out a research project designed to gain an insight into the firm's structure, its operations and its environment. A study guide provides a framework for a detailed report on the host company. The program has several objectives:

1. Through their directed study, the students will acquire an understanding of current practices of selected French firms. in addition, their relations with the company staff will enable them to gain a special avareness of major distinctive socio-cultural features of the French business environment.

2. The students will increase their proficiency in French through their daily exposure to business situations and the study of the firm's past and present projects and related activities.

3. The students will gain an understanding of international business practices since the South of France is closely connected with other E.E.C. countries as well as is the first trading partner of North Africa.

4. French firms will be made aware of Franco-American business opportunities and possible future economic exchanges and cooperation between our State and the South-East region of France.

In its first edition, seven students were placed with solar energy high-tech firms , as well as at the Regional Chamber of Commerce. in 1986, we were able to offer internship positions to nine students in a greater variety of firms, such as in two banks (Crédit Lyonnais and Société Marseillaise de Crédit), a major manufacturer of boat equipment, at the Marseille bureau of International development and in several solar firms. This year, we are proud to offer twelve or more internship positions, in an even greater variety of companies, such a pharmaceutical firm, several computer software manufacturers, an advertising agency, a general engineering firm, two banks, and several positions at the bureau of International development, working with bio-tech and bio-medical firms.

Our program is opened to any college and University in the US. This year, two students from The State University of New-York at Albany, will be among the interns, and we hope to be able to take more students from other Universities in the future.

From the beginning, the research project carried out by the student played a key role in establishing the program. Although the French firms were extremely cooperative, they were not prepared to guide an American student, all the more so as the French students interns those firms might have had in the past, had very different goals from our students'. The objectives of our interns are to observe the company and study the history, structure, operations and environment of the business they are in. The study guide developed by my business colleague Jack Matthews, the co-founder and co-director of the program, includes questions to direct the interns' attention to the following aspects:

1 Administrative structure

2 History of the firm

3 Firms' activities and products

4 Markets and clients of the firm.

5 Channels of distribution and major competitors

6 Marketing strategy and techniques

7 Questions of Human resources (aspects of labor laws; employees representation; communication)

8 Sales data

9 Near-term projections and/or plans.

10 Other considerations

In this last sections, the students are directed to pay closer attention to problems and problem solving, to financing; what are the major problems faced by the firm? What are its relations to government agencies and, last but not least, the students are to recount and document a major project in which the company was involved.

It is well understood with the firm that the students have access to any document pertaining to the firm's activities; the intern's supervisor is instrumental in arranging the necessary meetings and interviews in and outside the firms for the student to complete his/her report. The firms have always been extremely forthcoming, trustful and have always assisted the students.

The student's report is then submitted to Professor Matthews and myself for review and grading at the end of the summer. In addition to this report, we have emphasized, from the start, that a brief report on a comparable business or institution in the US would be greatly interesting for the French firm. Indeed, the first year, prior to our departure, we met with several American solar design and engineering firms, visited the University solar research lab and met with the State solar division.

The growth of our program is mainly due to an increased interest in the French business community. Thanks to our excellent working relationships with the Regional Chamber of

Commerce of Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur, we are able to solicit businesses who have an interest in the US. This interest in the US has been the key to very successful internships. When we approach a given business, we propose that the student carry out a preliminary research, here in the US, on a comparable business, or on a specific market, and we solicit from the French firm a set of topics for our students to investigate. Our interns' first contact with the host company has been greatly improved, as they arrive armed with an interesting set of documents and data on areas of interest to the business. Both parties are better rewarded for their time and efforts; the firms can gain better and first-hand knowledge of products, services or techniques proven successful in this country; in turn, the students find the firm better prepared, they gain a faster and deeper knowledge of the firm's activity and problems, and they may literally be hired by the French firm to conduct additional in the US, all expenses paid. But I will come back to this aspect later.

Keeping the students' report in mind, let us examine hov their activities during the internship period can be related to various topics in our commercial French curricula. I shall use here the "survey of French Business courses in American Colleges and Universities", conducted by Judith G. Frommer. Harvard University and published in <u>French for Business and International Trade</u>, Volume I, n.3, Fall 1985, in which she highlighted what subjects seemed to be common to a lot of business French courses. "The

content of French business courses varies from institution to institution... According to the questionnaire responses, correspondence, business terminology, translation are included in nearly all business French courses... Advertising and banking are covered in most courses.." (p.3)

Furthermore, if we consider the complete list of nineteen topics listed in the questionnaire, it is easy to notice how a given research project conducted following an internship fits right within the major topics covered by most programs, and therefore provides students with an incredible illustration, a five-week long application exercise. It is only then a matter of choice to be made between the instructor and the students to decide what aspects of the business (i.e. what topics) will be particularly appropriate to study while in the company. For instance, a student with minimal business skills and a high level of French proficiency could concentrate on correspondence. The intern would ask the secretary to be able to read all letters addressed to the business, follow up what responses are given, sort out various forms of correspondence-from a standard business letter to a customer, a order letter, a complaint, a company memo, minutes of a meetings, telexes etc.. The same student could then during the last two weeks or so. be entrusted to write some of the responses; and naturally, the intern must familiarize him/herself with the "Minitel".

Research projects while in the company rarely cover all the items enumerated above; Far from it; all the projects we supervised so far focused on a few related items, which the students attempted to explore and document as precisely as possible. Let me briefly present another intern's report bearing upon import/export. The student spent the whole five weeks in the international sales division of a medium-sized, yet very efficient firm specializing in electronic equipment for boats(electromagnetic logs, compasses and the like). As her report indicates, she first toured the company and managed to get a good grasp of a firm where the research and product development divisions are predominant. This company exports a good deal of her production. After doing some specialized translation for the export sales manager, she devoted the rest of her internship to export procedures by revieving a series of contracts with other firms in and outside the E.E.C. She became familiar with air/sea or ground transportation documents, customs procedures, invoices, order forms etc... She proudly collected photocopies of these real transactions, gave them and added " there, for when you teach the chapter on import/export".

I always marvel when I visit the host firms and see our interns closely associated with the company's operations. Every second of their stay is a valuable moment during which they learn, either through discussion, reading, on-site visit or by merely being

privy to everything that takes place in the firm, good or not so good. As for language acquisition, needless to say, it is a dream; about 8 to 9 hours a day, alone, surrounded by French people most of whom know very little English, immersed in company jargon and business talk. We have found that, far from being relaxing-indeed the program may be misleading when we mention "South of France, Summer"-the internships are very stressful, even causing a certain amount of anxiety; consequently, we never take students who are not already familiar with major aspects of French life and culture. Thus, All their attention is focused on business terminology, operations and day to day happenings.

An internship program can become an essential part of your business language program; I have attempted to show what a tremendous training advantage it can give your students. But moreover, I also believe that a language internship program in a foreign country can have a significant impact on a business community, in both countries. By so doing, it all of a sudden removes your language program from the sole realm of the academia to lend it strong credibility in the eyes of that portion of the business community involved in International Trade.

I mentioned earlier that we found that French firms interested in the US market are much more responsive to the internship program. Indeed, in the past year several interns have

successfully acted as trade intermediaries for some of the French companies. One solar company last year hosted an intern who had a double major in French and marketing. Our student was in the company at the same time as a young engineer and while a major new solar shower unit for outdoor use (campground, beaches) was being developed. She witnessed all that process, wrote her report. At the end of the internship, the French firm, very pleased by the student's work and attitude, proposed to the student to carry out a preliminary market research in the US for the new product, plane ticket and all expenses paid. The student would be accompanied by the French engineer. She took the position and generated a substantial market report for the given product.

The most incredible success story so far is that of another intern who was placed at the Marseille's bureau of International development. While visiting several high-tech companies, he was approached by one who had tried to contact some American firms to sell portable hyperbaric chambers (pressurized oxygen chambers for victims of decompression sickness, carbon monoxide poisoning and other accidents) that they manufactured. Back here our student agreed to follow up on behalf of the French firm, found an interested American company, negotiated for the French. The company head came to the States over Christmas, successfully completed the deal and offered our student to be his exclusive representative on the US territory. In the meantime, $ 1 million

worth of equipment is being sold and the student got us on the first page of the Milwaukee Journal...

In brief, allow me to outline the two main types of research projects carried out by our students. The first type revolves around the study guide put together by Professor Matthews. In a medium-size company, the coverage of the ten points outlined above, supported by the appropriate documents, provides the student with an exceptional overview of a business operations and environment. This type of research is ideal for straight French majors with no other business exposure than our business French classes.

The other type of project consists in a two-tier report. the first stage is a more general account of the business operations; the second stage focuses on the creation and completion of an innovative research task in the company, in keeping with the student's business skills and based on a real-life problem or aspect in the company's operations. (two students designed and carried out specific market studies; one created a special computer program to help customers choose an appropriate financing for their solar homes and equipment).

From what precedes, it becomes obvious that we can play an important role as intermediaries between 2 business communities. Far from shying away from that role, I welcome it. I believe that such experiences can show American businesses how a high

proficiency in a Foreign language and the ability to function abroad can be decisive in getting a foothold on that foreign market; how we, language departments can be valuable pools of resources, actively contributing to international exchange and the economic development of our state.

Once successful channels of communication have been established with the business community, we should be able to overcome that natural impression of mistrust on both sides; To get businesses behind us, even nominally only, is and will be decisive in our growth process. the types of contacts our students establish for the French, they could easily make for American firms. Internship programs foster on strong ties with business communities and business institutions abroad. On the other hand, to train students better attune to new needs of businesses involved in international trade, one must entertain an open and productive relationship with those companies who are avare of Foreign language and area studies contribution to their efforts.

The last word comes, from Washington, in the form of an encouragement. J. David Edwards, of the Joint National Committee for Languages, reported, in along article on "Foreign languages education for international competitiveness: recent initiatives": "Congress reauthorized the 1986 Higher Education Act. Title VI, and Representative Leon Panetta successfully amended the bill to provide to provide grants to colleges and Universities funds for

internships for foreign language students to work overseas...[later, in the article, he noted]...there is mounting evidence that international internships are among the best ways to acquire international business expertise".

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